



December 2005

California Juvenile Dependency Data

This research update summarizes recent data and trends on children in the juvenile dependency system. The last version of this update was published in February 2005.

Referrals

In 2004, 491,926 children, aged 0–17, were referred to social services agencies in California for child abuse or neglect, of which 110,308, or 22%, were substantiated after investigation by child welfare staff. Since 2000, there has been only a slight population-adjusted increase from 50.5 referrals per 1,000 children ages 0–17 in 2000 to 51.4 per 1,000 in 2004. The percentage of referrals substantiated has varied from 22% to 24% during the past five years.

The most common reason given for referral in 2004 was general neglect (38%), followed by physical abuse (18%). Together these two allegations account for over half of the reasons for referrals since 2000, with seven others varying from less than 1 percent up to 11%.¹ Though they make up a small portion of the total referrals, the most likely allegations to be substantiated by child welfare staff each year are severe neglect and caretaker absence or incapacity, accounting for 52% and 47%, respectively, of the cases substantiated in 2004.

Children under one year of age have higher rates referrals of referrals for abuse and neglect than do older children. This group is more likely to have contact with people, such as medical staff, who can notice and report abuse. Among referred cases, those involving children under age one are also most likely to be substantiated (38%), followed by those concerned with children 1–2 and 3–5 years old (26% and 23%, respectively) and older children aged 6–10, 11–15, and 16–17 (21%, 20%, and 17%, respectively). Black and Hispanic children have higher rates of allegations of abuse and neglect than do white and Asian or Pacific Islander children in California. After referral, there are no race or ethnic differences in the percentage of referrals that are investigated or in the percentage that are substantiated by child welfare staff.

Court Cases

In 2004, there were 39,247 dependency filings, of which 33,815 were original filings and 5,432 were subsequent filings. This represents an 8% drop in new filings since 1995² and no change from 2003. In 1995, the courts closed 96 cases per 100 that were filed. Over the past several years, the case closure rate has varied from 94 cases per 100 that were filed to 87 cases per 100 filed were closed in 2004.³

¹ These include (with 2004 percentages in parentheses) sexual abuse (8%), severe neglect (2%), exploitation (0.1%), emotional abuse (9%), caretaker absence or incapacity (4%), at risk, sibling abused (11%), and substantial risk of abuse (10%).

² For the purposes of these statistics, each sibling is counted as having his or her own petition, though, as a practical matter, siblings may be listed on one petition.

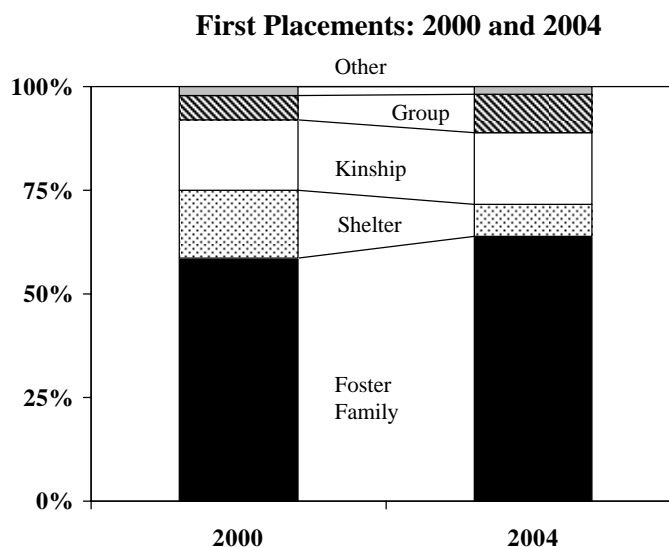
³ Cases may be closed the year they are open, or they may be closed later.

Consistently, over the past five years, about 29% of the allegations substantiated by child welfare staff have led to an original juvenile dependency court filing.⁴

Children Entering Foster Care

In 2004, 27,167 children entered foster care for the first time and stayed five days or longer. This figure represents slightly more than a 2% decline over the past five years (in absolute numbers) and, in relation to the growth of the child population in California, a decrease of nearly 6% since 2000. Seventy-eight percent of those 2004 first entries to foster care that lasted for five days or longer were for child neglect (including severe neglect, general neglect, and the absence or incapacity of a caretaker), 12% for physical abuse, and 5% for sexual abuse. The remaining 5% entered foster care for “other” reasons.

Children entering the foster care system for the first time in 2004 (and staying five or more days) were placed as follows: 64% with foster families, 17% with kin, 9% in group homes, 7% in shelters, and the remainder with guardians or in court-specified homes. Nonrelative foster families (62%) are divided into those that contract with county agencies (29%) and those that contract with foster family agencies (FFAs–35%). There has been little to no change between 2000 and 2004 in the percentage of first placements of five days or longer in kinship or guardianship living arrangements. However, the percentage of first placements in foster families through county agency contracts has decreased from 35% to 29% during this time, and the percentage going to foster families through private agencies has increased from 24% to 35%. Also during this time, the number of placements in group homes has increased, from 6% to 9%, while shelter placements have halved and the small numbers in court-specified homes decreased by more than three-fourths (see chart at right).



Children in the Dependency System

Child welfare agencies characterize cases across time by four discrete stages: (1) “emergency response,” when social workers respond to referrals, assess the family’s situation, and place children in initial placements; (2) “family reunification,” the time period (which can last 6, 12, or 18 months) when efforts are made to help reunify children in placement with their families; (3) “family maintenance,” when families receive services that help them keep children at home or help reintegrate children who have been returned to their family homes; and (4) “permanency planning,” when reunification is not possible or has failed and alternatives, such as adoption or guardianship, are planned.

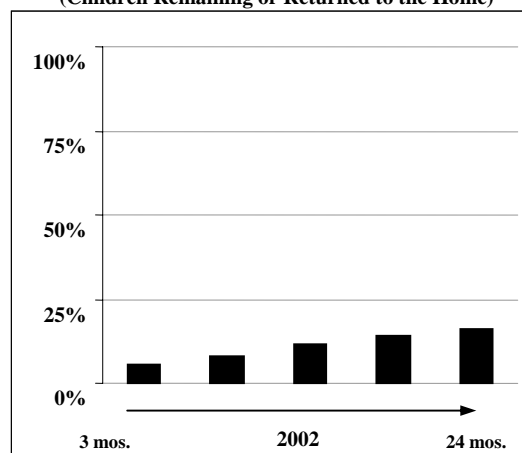
⁴ Lag time between substantiated allegations and court filings introduces a slight error in this calculation.

On a typical day⁵ in 2004, about 3% of the dependency cases were in the emergency response stage, 24% were in family reunification, 22% were in family maintenance, and 51% were in permanency planning. Although the number of children in the foster care system has decreased over the last four years from 140,200 children on January 1, 2000, to 115,873 on January 1, 2004 (a decrease of 20%),⁶ the distribution among the foster care stages has been relatively stable, except for a decrease of 25% in the proportion of children in emergency response.

Children remain in the home after substantiated referrals for a number of reasons, including situations where a child can remain safe through the provision of family maintenance services or immediate resolution of a problematic home situation. Therefore, only a minority of substantiated referrals of abuse or neglect led to the removal of children from the home. In 2003, there were 115,162 allegations substantiated by child welfare agencies, and in 2004 there were 110,308. Nevertheless, in 2004, 27,167 children were taken out of the home for at least five days or longer.

For children who remained in the home or were returned after their first substantiated referral⁷ of abuse or neglect, the likelihood of a second substantiated report becomes more likely over time (see chart at right). For cases opened in 2002 (the most recent year for which recurrence rates extending to 24 months are available), 6% had an additional substantiated allegation in the first three months after the original one. By 24 months, 18% of the cases had a recurrence. Children under 15 are more likely to have new, substantiated reports (17% within 24 months), with the percentage rapidly decreasing with age (8% for ages 16–17).

**Substantiated Recurrence of Abuse
by Length of Case: 2002 Entries**
(Children Remaining or Returned to the Home)



As California becomes increasingly diverse, with no ethnic or racial majority, so does the foster care system. In 2003, of the 83,921 children in out-of-home placement where the ethnic or racial background was known, 32% were white, 32% Hispanic, 32% black, 3% Asian or Pacific Islander, and 1% American Indian or Alaska Native. This diversity also extends to spoken languages. Though English remains the primary language spoken by 91% of the children in foster care, with Spanish spoken by 8%, more than 27 other primary languages were spoken by the remaining foster children.

Exiting and Reentering Foster Care

Children who are placed with kin and then sent home are less likely to reenter the foster care system than are children who were placed with non-kin. For instance, of those children entering foster care in 2000, 6% of those placed with kin and 9% of those placed with non-kin reentered out-of-home care within 6 months (a 32% gap). However, the gap narrows over time as cases are tracked further out.

⁵ As measured on January 1, 2004. Measurements are taken quarterly.

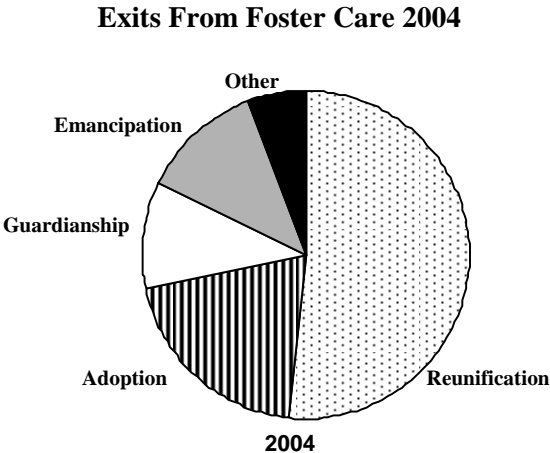
⁶ The number is adjusted to reflect California's population aged 0–17.

⁷ The referral categories of "at risk, sibling abused" and "substantial risk" are excluded. Analysis is based on the child's first substantiated allegation in the base year of 2002.

The data show that 13% of youth placed with kin and 17% placed with non-kin reentered out-of-home care within 24 months (a 24% gap).

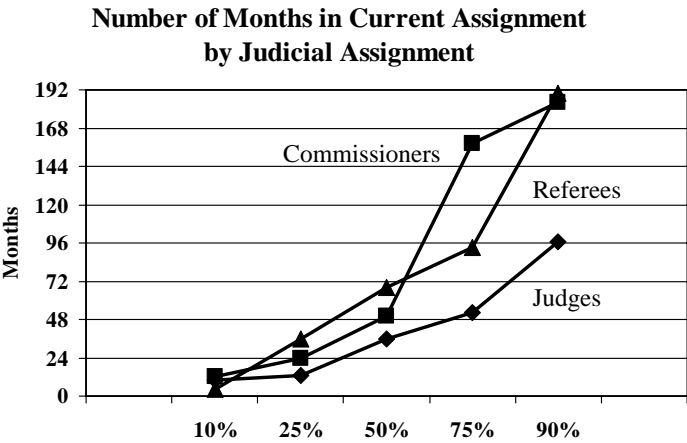
Throughout most of the 1990s, more children entered the foster care system than exited it. Since 1999, more children have exited than entered. Correspondingly, before 1998, the courts closed about 8 cases for every 10 they opened (measured by original filings) in a year. However, starting in 1998, they closed nearly as many cases as were opened.

In 2004, 35,990 children exited from foster care. The majority (52%) of these children were reunified with their families, 20% were adopted, 11% went to guardians, and 12% were emancipated (see chart at right).



Background of Judicial Officers in Juvenile Dependency

In 2004, the Administrative Office of the Courts (AOC) conducted a mail-in survey of judges, commissioners, and referees who have regular assignments to hear juvenile dependency cases. This project estimated that there were 121 such individuals who collectively account for 78 full-time positions. They have been in their assignments for an average (median) of 3 years and 10 months. There were differences by job title. Judges served an average of 3.5 years in their current assignments; commissioners, 4 years and 2 months; and referees, 5 years and 8 months (see chart at right). Seven out of 10 judicial officers had professional experience in juvenile court before their assignments. Most had more than one type of prior involvement: about 40% were parent's attorneys, 36% children's attorneys, and 30% children's attorneys in delinquency.



Some Resources for Children and Caretakers

- Court Appointed Special Advocates are trained volunteers who advocate for children in the juvenile court. CASA volunteers are available to children in 41 counties as well as through one Native American tribe in California. The number of children who have CASA volunteers varies by county, depending on the availability of volunteers in the particular county.
- Juvenile dependency mediation programs assist parties in resolving contested issues in a nonadversarial way. Juvenile dependency mediators are available in 23 counties.

- Foster kinship care education provides training to current and prospective foster care providers. Sixty-seven such programs are available through community colleges to adults in 52 counties.
- The California State Office of the Ombudsman for Foster Care reviews and resolves complaints from or on behalf of children in the foster care system. This service, available since 2000, now receives almost 9,000 contacts each year for information, complaint resolution, and referrals to services. In 2003 there were 8,903 contacts, of which about a thousand (12%) were complaints. Only a small fraction of these actually resulted in a case conference—a facilitated meeting between the foster youth and relevant parties and professionals to try to resolve the complaint.

About the California Juvenile Statistical Abstract

The *California Juvenile Statistical Abstract*, a project of the AOC's Center for Families, Children & the Courts, is a compilation of reliable, representative, statistical data about children and families involved in the courts and with related institutions. It is available on the Internet in PDF format at <http://www.courtinfo.ca.gov/programs/cfcc/programs/description/CJSA.htm>.

This research update is one of a series that summarize data from the abstract.

Data Sources

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